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## JEAN BRUNET, CHIPPEWA VALLEY PIONEER

WILLIAM W. BARTLETT

If the question were asked as to who was the most noteworthy person in the early history of the Chippewa Valley, the answer would probably be Jean Brunet. Yet his story has largely escaped permanent record, and nothing approaching a biography of him has ever been printed. In the publications of the State Historical Society ten scattering references to Brunet may be found; here and there in other local historical works may be found brief mention of him, but taken altogether they afford nothing like a complete story of his life. To reconstruct this story, in so far as it can now be done, is the purpose of the present article. Fortunately for this purpose it is still possible to supplement the few sources of information in print with the testimony of persons still living who were intimately connected with the Chippewa Valley pioneer.

From a *History of Northern Wisconsin* published at Chicago in 1881 by A. T. Andreas may be gleaned considerable about Jean Brunet. The writer seems to have taken considerable pains in collecting his information, and Brunet had been dead but a few years when this account was written. It states<sup>1</sup> that Brunet was born in France and came out to St. Louis in 1818, where he entered the employ of the Chouteaus. By them he was sent in 1820 to Prairie du Chien, then the most important point in the upper Mississippi Valley.

At Prairie du Chien Brunet engaged in various activities and evidently became a man of considerable prominence. The account already noted states that he married the sister of Joseph Rolette, who was long the most prominent citizen of the place. Rolette had come out to Prairie

<sup>1</sup> Pages 192-94.

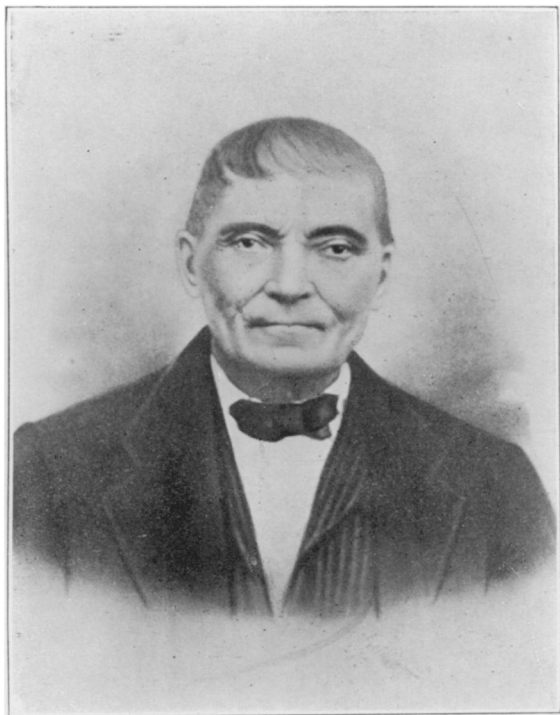
du Chien in 1806, and he died there in 1842. He developed large business interests, and was a man of progressive ideas. Brunet's employment with the Chouteaus must have been soon terminated, for McCabe's *Gazeteer of Wisconsin* represents him as keeping a tavern (the second one kept at Prairie du Chien) in 1821.<sup>2</sup> This tavern was continued quite a number of years, being mentioned by Judge Lockwood in his recollections of the Winnebago War of 1827. "I went to my house and found it vacant," he says, "and went to the old village where I found my family and most of the inhabitants of the Prairie assembled at the house of Jean Brunet, who kept a tavern. Mr. Brunet had a quantity of square timber about him, and the people proposed building breastworks with it."<sup>3</sup>

Tavern-keeping could not have been a business of much magnitude in Prairie du Chien a century ago, and along with it Brunet carried on other enterprises. In 1822, according to Edward Beouchard,<sup>4</sup> Brunet and one Disbrow had a keel-boat on the river, which Beouchard was employed in running for them. Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, who later became vice president of the United States, came out to the lead mines and stopped for a time at Prairie du Chien—whether at Brunet's inn is not a matter of record. A Fox Indian came to Prairie du Chien offering to sell his "diggings" on Fever River. Johnson became interested in the matter and hired the keel-boat of Brunet and Disbrow to convey himself and goods to Fever River. The boat was placed in Beouchard's charge, with orders that in case Johnson should buy the diggings of the Indian and desire help in the erection of cabins Beouchard was to

<sup>2</sup> This gazeteer was never published, but a portion of the data gathered for it was printed in installments in the *Lancaster Wisconsin Herald*. The statement noted is included in McCabe's statistics of Prairie du Chien, printed in the *Herald*, August 23, 1845.

<sup>3</sup> *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, II, 161.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 290.



**JEAN BRUNET**  
From a crayon portrait owned by Ben Gauthier

remain and assist him. Johnson bought the property and not long after went back to Kentucky. Beouchard helped erect several cabins for him and sending back the boat and hands to Prairie du Chien remained, with Brunet's consent, at Johnson's diggings all winter.

In 1824 occurred a tragedy on the upper Mississippi in which Brunet was indirectly involved; the story of it which has been preserved sheds considerable light upon his business activities at this period. John Findley was a young man who came to Prairie du Chien in the early years of the American reoccupation following the War of 1812. Findley clerked for a time in the suttlng establishment of Governor Alexander McNair of Missouri; while thus employed he fell in love with a half-sister of Mrs. Rolette and married her. His employer, learning of this, concluded that the clerk was not attending to his business with sufficient singleness of devotion and discharged him.<sup>5</sup> Findley now engaged in the Indian trade on his own account, but failing to make a success of it, some time before 1824 entered the employ of Brunet. In the summer of 1824 Brunet sent him, accompanied by three Canadian boatmen, on a business mission to Fort Snelling. At Lake Pepin the traders fell in with a war party of Chippewa from Lake Superior who were out in search of Sioux scalps.<sup>6</sup> The warriors had nothing against the white men; but they had failed to procure the scalps of any of their hereditary enemies, and swayed by savage impulsiveness, they fell upon the whites and speedily massacred them. The remains of the murdered men were soon discovered, and detachments of soldiers were sent to the spot from both Fort Snelling and Fort Crawford. In all, some two hundred men, soldiers and volunteers, journeyed to Lake Pepin to avenge the murders. "Mons

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 127.

<sup>6</sup> For this affair, see Warren's "History of the Ojibway Nation," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, V, 389-92.

Jean<sup>7</sup> Brunet was along," records Warren, "and had been most active in raising this force." Evidently he was a man of enterprise and of influence among his fellows. This impression is confirmed by other references to him in Judge Lockwood's recollections, from which we have already quoted. Thus at the time of the Winnebago trouble in 1827, when the residents of Prairie du Chien were organizing a military company for self-protection, Brunet was one of the three officers chosen to command the company<sup>7</sup>; while after the battle of the Pecatonica in 1832 "the prominent men of Prairie du Chien, not included in the army," joined in presenting a gun to General Dodge as a memorial of their esteem. Among the seven names signed to this memorial we find that of Jean Brunet. Five years later he was elected to the territorial house of representatives from Crawford County, serving at its second regular session of 1837-38 at Burlington, and in the special session of June, 1838 at the same place, although it does not positively appear that he was in attendance at this latter session.

We are now on the eve of Brunet's removal from Prairie du Chien to the Chippewa Valley, where the remainder of his life was to be spent. In July, 1837 an important treaty was negotiated by Governor Dodge with the Chippewa tribe at Fort Snelling, by the terms of which a vast tract of Chippewa territory was ceded to the United States. In Wisconsin it included the greater portion of the northern and western parts of the state, covering the famous pineries whose cutting constituted the state's most notable industry for two generations following the treaty. For this vast extent of land, with its untold wealth in timber, the Indians were to receive the paltry sum of \$810,000 in goods and money, distributed over twenty annual payments.

<sup>7</sup> *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, II, 164.

Foremost to exploit the forest wealth thus thrown open to citizens of the United States was a group of Wisconsin men which included Hercules L. Dousman of Prairie du Chien; Lyman Warren, the La Pointe trader; William A. Aitkin, also a trader among the Chippewa; and General H. H. Sibley.<sup>8</sup> They placed Jean Brunet in charge of the enterprise, and an expedition was fitted out at Prairie du Chien to build a sawmill at the falls of the Chippewa. Brunet engaged boatmen, axmen, loggers, and mechanics chiefly from the French-Canadian population at the Prairie. The venture, however, did not prove a success under Brunet's leadership; the difficulties encountered proved more tedious than had been anticipated, and greater than the resources of the little party could surmount. The pioneers under Brunet's lead had pointed the way for the development of an industry which later assumed vast proportions in the Chippewa Valley; but the work of developing it shortly passed into other hands.

But the lure of the Chippewa proved too strong for Brunet to overcome. His movements during the next year or two are uncertain, although there is reason to think he continued to make his headquarters at the Falls. At any rate he is reported here in June, 1843, when Alfred Brunson's party came to the Falls enroute overland from Prairie du Chien to La Pointe.<sup>9</sup> Brunson was opening an overland trail from the lead mines to the copper country which, in the flush of its first great boom, was then attracting great attention on the part of Wisconsin's lead miners. A ferry would be needed to convey travelers across the river at Chippewa Falls, and already, according to Brunson, "Mr. Brunet" had a flatboat nearly completed for this purpose.

<sup>8</sup> *History of Northern Wisconsin*, 193.

<sup>9</sup> Letter of Brunson from Chippewa Falls, printed in *Lancaster Wisconsin Herald*, July 22, 1843.

Somewhat later than this, probably, the precise date being unknown, Brunet built a cabin on the west bank of the Chippewa about twenty-five miles above the Falls, and at the foot of a smaller fall in the river which shortly took his name. Here he resided the remainder of his life. For some years he carried on a fur trade and barter with the Indians. As the lumbering operations increased and the fur trade grew less he built a more commodious dwelling and kept a stopping place for the accommodation of the loggers, rivermen, and others passing to and from the lumbering regions farther up the Chippewa and its tributaries. Of all the stopping places on the Chippewa River that of Jean Brunet was best and most favorably known.

One of the men who came with Brunet's original party to the Chippewa in 1838 was Francis Gauthier. He remained in Brunet's employ; and when the latter built his cabin at what came to be known as Brunet Falls (now Cornell), Gauthier removed thither with him. He received no regular wages, but was treated by Brunet as his son. As the years passed he married and brought up his family in the Brunet home; after Brunet's death the courts awarded to Gauthier what property he had left. Gauthier is recalled by persons still living as an interesting man and one who was highly esteemed. He was much more of a woodsman and explorer than was Brunet, and he made many long canoe trips upon the upper Chippewa and its tributaries.

A daughter of Francis Gauthier, Mrs. Gustave Robert of Holcombe, has spent her entire life within five or six miles of her birthplace in the old Brunet cabin. Like many another pioneer, she had in her youth no educational advantages, but she speaks French, English, and Chippewa fluently, and is generally well-informed upon the events of the day, while her mind is a storehouse of information



concerning pioneer days on the Chippewa. From her the information which follows has been gained:

My father, Francis Gauthier, was of French-Canadian descent. I do not know the date of his birth, and am not certain whether he was born in Canada or not. If he was he must have left there at an early age, as he was only a young boy when he began work for Jean Brunet at Prairie du Chien. Mr. Brunet took a great liking to my father, and he was one of the party that came up with Mr. Brunet to build the first mill at Chippewa Falls, later going with him to what is now Brunet Falls, or Cornell. About the year 1846 Father married my mother, whose maiden name was Sophie Jandron. She was from the Odanah reservation and was of mixed French and Chippewa descent. Six children were born to them in the Brunet home, five of whom are still living.

I do not know when Mr. Brunet was born, but as far back as I can remember he seemed to be an old man. He was a fine looking man, always clean-shaven and very neat in his personal appearance. Whenever he made a trip to Chippewa Falls he always wore his fine broadcloth Prince Albert coat, with white shirt and cravat. In his later years he was much reduced in circumstances, and his clothes at times were really shabby, but even then he would not wear clothing that was patched. I think Mr. Brunet was from the upper class in France. He kept his accounts and gave general oversight to his affairs, but never did any manual labor himself. He was always kind and polite. The loggers and rivermen who stopped with him received the usual accommodations of other such stopping places, but when business or professional men came along they were treated by him as guests. He always sat at the head of the table. These men would be seated near him and Mr. Brunet would serve. Mr. Brunet was deeply religious, a devout Catholic, and very faithful in all the observances of the Church. He never sat down to the table without saying grace. In those early days his home was the gathering place of those of the Catholic faith from the surrounding vicinity for religious instruction when occasional traveling priests visited the valley.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Brunet did not bring his wife up from Prairie du Chien until after he had

<sup>10</sup> Brunet was the first president of the St. John the Baptist Society in the Chippewa Valley. In 1911 the Chippewa Lumber and Boom Company was closing up its lumbering operations at the Falls. At the annual meeting of the company, held January 5 of that year, funds were voted for the erection of a suitable monument to the memory of Brunet in the cemetery at Chippewa Falls. This action was taken in recognition of Brunet's activities in connection with the first sawmill at Chippewa Falls. The officers of the St. John the Baptist Society were notified of the action taken by the company, and in June the monument was erected under the auspices of that society. The inscription, which is in French, may be translated as follows: "To the Pious Memory of the Valiant Pioneer, Jean Brunet, First President of the St. John the Baptist Society of Chippewa Falls, Wis. Born 1791 in Gascogne, France. Died the 20th of August, 1877. Rest in Peace. Builder of the first Chippewa Falls Sawmill in 1836."

spent some years in the Chippewa Valley, but he used to visit her several times a year. I remember her very well. Like Mr. Brunet she was very devout, and spent much of her time in her room engaged in religious devotions. She looked older than Mr. Brunet, and always wore a close-fitting cap or bonnet. She died shortly after the Civil War. One of my most cherished keepsakes is a French Catholic prayer book which she gave me on my second birthday. On the flyleaf she wrote this inscription: "Donné le 20 d'avril par Madame Brunet a Josephine Gauthier, age de 2 ans. Riviere des Sauteurs."

Mr. Brunet was a true friend to the Indians, and they always stopped with him when going up or down the river. He never made any charge to them for meals, but they often brought him venison in return. There was always a great gathering of them at his home on New Year's Day, and soon after daylight they would announce their arrival by firing off guns. They would quickly put up their tepees and build their campfires, tom toms would be heard, and the vicinity of the Brunet home would assume the appearance of an Indian village. The Indians often camped near the house. I remember once an Indian child was very sick and my mother went over to see it, taking me along. The medicine man was there performing his ceremonies. He put something that looked like dried bones in his mouth, chewed them up, and spit them into a basin of water on the ground. After examining the water he said the child would die at sunrise the next morning. It was the Indian custom to announce a death among them by firing off guns. Next morning, just as the sun rose we heard the guns, and knew that the child was dead.

For many years after he came on the Chippewa Mr. Brunet lived in a one-room log cabin, with curtains around the beds. When I was about twelve years old he built a long log house facing the river. The house was torn down many years ago, but the foundation can still be seen. The kitchen was on the south, or down-river end, with bedrooms opening off of it for my father and mother and their children. The next room was a large dining room, which was deeper than the other rooms and had cupboards clear across the back end. Beyond this was Mr. Brunet's room, while the men's room was at the north, or upper, end of the house. A stair led up to the loft which ran the full length of the house and served as sleeping quarters for the men. In going to the dining room they did not pass through Mr. Brunet's room, but had to go outdoors.

My father looked after the outside work around the Brunet place, while my mother, who was a good cook and housekeeper, with the help of us girls, took care of the housework. Mrs. Brunet never did any housework, although she did a good deal of patchwork for quilts. At times, when large crews of woodmen and log drivers were going and coming, we had our hands full. At other times housework lagged, and we would make buckskin mittens and gloves, and plain and beaded moccasins.

Raspberries, blackberries, and cranberries were plentiful. Blueberries did not grow near, but the Indians used to bring them to us.

Wild plums grew in abundance. We did not know anything about the canning of fruit, but we used to dry berries and corn. For meat we had salt pork, smoked hams, and a plentiful supply of smoked venison. Fish could be had in any quantity, and partridges and other small game. Mr. Brunet raised a good supply of potatoes and other garden vegetables. Our table fare was hearty but simple. In the pastry line about the only articles we had were doughnuts and pies made of dried apples, dried berries, or cranberries.

We had our simple games and plays. The older folks played cards a good deal, and sometimes there would be a dance. Although I never used a gun, we used to fish, and all of us were at home on the water. I could pole or paddle a birch bark canoe, either standing or sitting, and there was never any lack of canoes. The Indians would start from the headwaters of the Chippewa with their canoes in the fall, hunting and trapping on their way down. By the time they were ready to return, the river would be frozen over and they would leave their canoes at the Brunet place, making new ones for the next trip. The whole country around was almost an unbroken pine forest and one could walk for hours without seeing the sun. But we girls were never afraid to be out alone in the woods or on the river, and were never molested either by Indians or by white men.

Jean Brunet was fond of reading but he did not take any interest in hunting, fishing, or other out-of-door sports. Like nearly everyone in those early days he drank intoxicating liquor, but unlike most tavern-keepers he did not keep it on sale and seldom had it on the place. He kept a small stock of the staple supplies needed in lumber camps and by the Indians and the few white residents of the vicinity. He cut a great deal of wild hay on the marshes, which he sold to the loggers; and he raised and sold a good many oxen.

Mr. Brunet selected a fine location for his home. His cabin was built on the west bank of the Chippewa, perhaps eighty rods below the present Brunet Falls dam. The site was level and high enough to be always dry. Below the falls and in front of the cabin was a bay, formed by a bend in the river, with very little current. In the side of the bank between the cabin and the river was a fine spring which supplied the house with water.

There were no roads in this section in the early days. In winter supplies were hauled up the river on the ice, while in summer and fall all travel was by boat. Two kinds of boats were in use for transporting supplies. The earliest ones were dugouts made from a single large pine log. In later years these largely gave place to bateaux, which were large boats with both ends pointed. Mr. Brunet derived a considerable income from portaging these boats and their contents around the falls. The bay below the falls afforded a good landing place. From this point a road had been graded along the side of the bank to a suitable point in the river above the falls. Mr. Brunet had a four-wheeled wagon, the heavy wheels of which were made of sections sawed from a large pine log. He had a regular charge for the boats, but the charge for carrying the goods was made by the hundred

weight. I well remember the old cart with the wooden wheels; at a later time it was replaced by one having iron wheels.

Mr. Brunet would have been well-to-do in his old age if he had not lost so much money in bad accounts. As it was, he had nothing at the time of his death except the place, the value of which at the time was only a few hundred dollars. I have in my possession an old ledger in which Mr. Brunet kept his accounts from the year 1862 until his death. Many of the accounts were never settled, and some of the amounts due were quite large. Mr. Brunet died in August, 1877, and was buried in the Catholic cemetery at Chippewa Falls. My father, Francis Gauthier, died in January, 1880. My mother died in 1909.